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ABSTRACT

Educational planning cannot succeed without attention to social factors. Basically, all authors agree that sociology of education deals with three categories of problems. First, it involves study of relations between educational systems and the rest of society, including the economy. The second category of problems is related to the educational system or school as a social system or organization in itself. Third, sociology of education deals with the social aspects of the learning process. Clearly, sociology of education is related in numerous ways to the various problems that educational planners have to face. To learn to look for social factors and social forces and their mutual interdependence and to view education as an integral part of a social whole is probably the most important component of sociological sensibility and of the sociological approach to educational planning. (Author/JG)

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The Fundamentals of Educational Planning : Lecture - Discussion Series

No. 30 THE SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

by L. Cerych

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THE SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

by

Ladislav Cerych

This lecture is part of "Fundamentals of Educational Planning; Lecture-Discussion Series" a controlled experiment undertaken by the International Institute for Educational Planning in collaboration with a limited number of organizations and individuals aiming at the development of efficient teaching materials in the field of educational planning. By their very nature these materials, which draw upon tape recordings, transcriptions and summary notes of seminars, lectures and discussions, conducted by IIEP as part of its training and research programme, are informal and not subject to the type of editing customary for published documents. They are therefore not to be considered as "official publications".

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INTRODUCTION

Educational planning cannot succeed, that is, the targets will not be achieved, if it does not pay attention to social factors. From the practical point of view you could hardly find any specific problem where social factors do not play a role. They play a role in rural education, in the teacher bottlenecks, they are decisive with respect to social demand, and so on. Social aspects are also important from a theoretical and conceptual point of view, because education is part of the social whole. As such, it is influenced by the rest of the society and it has an impact upon the social system in which it operates. So both from the practical and theoretical point of view an educational planner must analyse social aspects of education. This has been recognised in almost all conferences on educational planning held during the past five or ten years. Even when purely economic or statistical problems were discussed, the conclusion has always been reached that solutions must be sought in an analysis which goes beyond pure statistics or pure economics. However, curiously enough, there exists so far no book which provides the educational planner or policy-maker with some kind of conceptual framwork for this purpose, a book showing which social aspects it is important to consider in educational planning.

Our task here is to define at least some of the elements of such a conceptual framework. Obviously we shall have to turn to sociology, a science which sometimes appears as too theoretical or too general with little practical relevance, sometimes as too technical and hardly comprehensible to anybody who has not studied it for some years.

Sociology of Education

The part of sociology most important for educational planners is, of course, sociology of education. It can be defined as a study of relations between education and society; in other words a social science concerned with educational aims, methods, institutions, administration and curricula in relation to the economic, political, religious, social and cultural forces of the society in which they function. This is only one possible definition. Many others exist. In fact, each author will have his own definition, as will each period of history, because sociology of education is a relatively well established science, an older one, for example, than economics of education. One of the first great names in sociology of education is undoubtedly Emile Durkheim. According to this famous French scholar sociology of education should preoccupy itself with, (a) current social facts of education and their sociological functions; (b) relationships between education and social and cultural change; (c) cross-cultural and comparative research in various types of educational systems, and (d) the classroom and school as an ongoing social system.

Basically all authors agree that sociology of education deals with three categories of problems. First, with relations between the educational system and the rest of society, including the economy.

The second category of problems concerns the internal structure of education, for example, relations between teachers and students, and, in general, roles and behaviours of the various participants in the educational system - teachers, administrators, students, etc. In other words, education will be considered as a social system in itself and, possibly also, as an organization.

Thirdly, sociology of education deals with the social aspects of the theory of learning.

Which of these three categories - links between education and the rest of the society; the school as a social system; the social aspects of the theory of learning - is relevant to the educational planner? To answer this question we must say a little more about each of them.

Links between education and rest of society

When we speak about the links between the educational system and the rest of the society we usually have in mind, first of all, the functioning of the educational system within a given culture. Secondly, we might think of the relationship between the educational system and the power structure. Who controls education? Who are the decision-making bodies with regard to education? How are the decision-making processes influenced by existing social structures? Thirdly, we can consider the function of the educational system in the process of social and cultural change, or in the maintenance of the 'status quo'. Obviously all these are questions of the greatest interest to educational planners, especially in developing countries. The educational planners' aim is to contribute to the development and change of society. To what extent can education initiate this change - or does change of the educational system have to wait for a preliminary change in society? Historically, most educational systems have been modified under the influence of social changes - it has seldom been the other way round; but, in reality, you never have a simple casual relation. There is always some kind of reciprocity.

Education and the class system

Another important problem belonging to the category of questions concerning external links of education is the relationship of education to social class. Many people indeed believe that sociology of education means essentially that. You all know of studies showing that the proportion of upper-class or middle-class children in a given school system is much higher than the proportion of, say, farmers' or workers' children. In France, for instance, although the agricultural population represents something like 20 or 25 per cent of the population, farmers' children constitute only 2 or 3 per cent of students enrolled in higher education; and the same is true as far as the other lower classes are concerned. Often problems of this sort are considered under the heading of "democratisation" of the educational systems. They are very important problems - as much in developed as in developing countries - but certainly not the only ones to be considered.

Education and ethnic groups

In certain ways similar to those in the preceding group are problems concerning the relationship of the formal educational system to racial ethnic and other social groups. These problems interest particularly planners in certain developing countries because it is here that ethnic origin might constitute one of the most important factors of participation in the formal school system. The sociologist should tell the planner or policy-maker why certain ethnic groups have a lower rate of participation than others and what practical measures are to be taken in consequence.

The school as a social system

The second great category of problems covered by sociology of education is related to the school or to the educational system, as a social system or as an organization in itself. That means that you study, not only the external links, but also the internal structure, of education or of educational organizations. There are certain structures more innovative than others. What are the rules which govern relations between various participants in the educational system - teachers, students, administrators? How to consider the problem of student unrest and of student power? What are the characteristics and constraints of the decision-making process in education? Many of these questions belong both to the sociology of education and to organizational analysis (or theory of organization) which is another branch of sociology relevant to educational planning.

Social aspects of the learning process

Thirdly, sociology of education deals with the social aspects of the learning process. We all know that one of the first objectives of education is socialization; but, of course, the school is not the only socialization agent. The family, the churches, professional associations, are not less important. Sociology here provides you with a theoretical basis for the statement often made by educational planners, namely that not all education can take place within the formal school system. It has also to answer questions such as: What is the impact of these various socialization agents on the way children behave in school, on how and what they learn? Which social milieux favours the learning process in schools, and why? What can the school do to compensate for a lack of a favourable milieux?

As you see, sociology in general and sociology of education in particular, are related in numerous ways to problems which educational planners have to face.

Let me now examine briefly a few of them in order to show what I call the practical utility of sociology to educational planning.

Setting realistic targets

First, sociology can help you in suggesting a realistic definition of objectives and functions of the educational system and to avoid targets and functions which, although they seem very desirable at first sight, cannot be fulfilled because the social system as a whole will resist their implementation.

In this respect society behaves similarly to a human body: it will reject, that is to say not assimilate, targets and functions which are so to say "genetically" incompatible with it. This does not mean that educational systems cannot be changed, but often the change can only take place at a rather slow pace or by first overcoming the "genetical incompatibility". In most societies education had always a conservative function, i.e. to transmit existing cultural and social values. It had, as sociologists say, a pattern maintenance function, such as in England, to prepare young people to become gentlemen in the eighteenth or nineteenth century sense of the world.

Today, however, developing and developed countries want the educational system to do something which it has rarely done in the past: produce (or at least strengthen) new values and new norms which will favour economic development. In view of that aim, how should one proceed without being unrealistic? The educational planner is always asked, as a first step, to appraise the existing educational system, to find out what type of schools there are, how many pupils in those schools, how many teachers available, etc. He should, I think, also find out what the functions of education are and were in the given country. In requiring from the educational system the fulfilment of new functions, the existing ones must be considered in the first place because it is the existing functions which may create resistances and make it impossible to implement targets which otherwise seem perfectly reasonable. Two types of functions must be considered - manifest and latent (formal and informal). A manifest function is one which is openly, formally stated, for example, in education, teaching and, at higher levels, possibly also research. A latent (informal) function of a social system is one which originated more or less spontaneously within the system, without any formal decision or rationalization. For example, a latent function of the educational system is that it keeps children up to a certain age out of the labour market, which obviously has important economic implications. When you study the functions of the educational system, therefore, you have to take into account not only those which have been officially proclaimed, but also those which developed spontaneously and which are not visible at first sight.

All these functions can be examined from three points of view: that of the government, of the individual, and of the particular school. They may or may not coincide. The main function of a given school system, from the point of view of the government, might be to provide high and middle-level manpower. From the point of view of the individual it might be to achieve prestige. High-level manpower positions such as engineering may or may not be positions of prestige.

The planner or policy-maker may decide that a given number of agronomists is needed and he therefore decides to make more young people study agronomy by using various measures such as better facilities, more scholarships. But the policy can fail: more people will study agriculture because they have no choice. But when they have their degree, most of them will look for a job elsewhere than in practical agriculture. A few years ago in India, for example, 95 per cent of the country's agricultural engineers worked in the Ministry of Agriculture in New Delhi and only 3 or 4 per cent in actual farming. This might have been also due - partly at least - to the lack of better employment opportunities, but the individual's view of the functions and finality of education certainly played an important role which could obviously not be changed by a simple political decision.

To sum up, a planner must make an historical and functional analysis of the existing educational system and take its findings into account when fixing new targets and functions, and especially measures to achieve them.

Evaluating the social demand for education

The second specific problem with an important sociological dimension is evaluation and projection of the social demand for education and of the factors which influence it. In most countries, whether developed or developing, the social demand for education is without any doubt the most important force behind the rapid expansion of the system. You might decide, on the basis of a manpower analysis and projections, that you need only so many people in universities, or so many in secondary schools. What has often happened in the recent past was that enrolments foreseen for the subsequent ten or fifteen years were attained in less than half the period. Social demand for education gave to the system its own internal dynamics - beyond the control of the planner and of the politician.

What needs to be considered are the factors - the variables - which influence this social demand. Can they be oriented or manipulated one way or another? And, first of all, can you make projections of the future social demand for education? So far our knowledge in this field is very elementary and an appropriate methodology has still to be developed, but it is certain that such methodology has to work with sociological concepts: class, social stratification, social mobility, etc., all of them represent more or less important factors (variables) of the social demand for education.

Rural education

A third specific area where a sociological approach seems indispensable is rural education in developing countries. The main question which arises in this respect is whether schools in rural areas should not be organized in view of the fact that 90 per cent of the pupils will not progress beyond primary education. Should not, therefore, primary rural education contain some professional and vocational elements? But practical experience has shown that in most cases

professionalization of primary schools results in failure. This is first of all because of various resistances on the part of both parents and teachers. Buy why resistance? To a great extent it is because the proposals introducing vocational elements into primary education have disregarded the basic nature of the relation between education and the given society. In particular, they have disregarded the motivations and expectations which many parents had when they sent their children to school, namely to give them a chance to leave the traditional sector. By introducing agricultural elements into primary education in rural areas, these proposals were in a sense, and in the eyes of many people, disrupting one of the important functions of education in that society.

The teacher bottleneck

A fourth problem worth mentioning here is the famous teacher bottleneck. We know that, in many cases, the lack of teachers is not entirely due to low salaries. We know of countries where teachers' salaries are relatively high, even compared to salaries in the civil service and yet young people remain reluctant to go into teaching. It might be connected with two eminently sociological reasons, namely with the social status and role of teachers in the community. Thus planning the future supply of teachers without taking into account these sociological factors - status and role - is not a realistic method.

General versus technical education

Finally, the problem of general versus technical education. At first sight this may seem primarily an economic problem. Indeed we insist upon more technical education because manpower projections have shown that the country needr more technicians. But is the insufficient number of technicians due to a lack of facilities or to resistance of parents to send their children to technical schools, because they are considered to be of a lower status and prestige than grammar or general schools? And if so, does this lack of attraction of technical education result, as is often assumed, from a certain resistance to manual work or more simply from the fact that, in the past, employment opportunities for technicians were scarce and jobs badly paid? Only a sociological analysis can reveal at least part of the truth and show what practical action can be effective.

At the same time, and this applies for all the problem areas mentioned, we should always be careful not to assume that, what is true in one country, is true everywhere. Let us not fall into the habit of using stereotypes, as has often been the case with regard to the issue of general versus technical education.

Sociological method

In a short exposé of this kind it is of course impossible to present, even in a summary way, the major methods and methodologies to be used in a sociological approach to educational planning problems. I must therefore stress the imperatives of what I would call "sociological sense" of "sociological sensibility". These terms to me imply essentially a kind of consciousness of an "omnipresence of social factors" and of their inter-relations. To look for social factors or social forces and for their mutual interdependence, to consider education always as an integral part of a social whole is, in my opinion, the most important component of sociological sensibility and also of the sociological approach to educational planning.

Suggested Additional Reading

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